Reflective Teacher Journal for Informed Approaches to Peer-to-Peer Mediation and Feedback in Group Discussion

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ABSTRACT

This project considers how a reflective journal afforded my pedagogical understanding of and approaches to a second-language English discussion class, guided by Vygotskian socio-cultural theory, mediation, and peer-to-peer assistive feedback. Motivated by the reflective journal I identified feedback types, pursued classroom adaptions, and observed changes in my journal-keeping strategies. Adaptions to classroom methodology enhanced peer-to-peer feedback strategy for more effective assistance and mediation in group-based discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Reflective Teaching Journal

In second language teaching, the benefits of a reflective teacher journal include exploration of beliefs and practices, heightened awareness of teaching style, raised questions with future plans, and self-monitoring (Farrell, 2007). Concerning the purposes of journal keeping, Murphy (2014) outlines four points:

> (1) to expand our understanding of the teaching-learning process; (2) to expand our repertoire of strategic options as language teachers; (3) to take ownership of our own theories of language teaching as informed by the teaching practice; and (4) to enhance the quality of learning opportunities we are able to provide in language classrooms (p. 614).

As for the procedures of journal keeping, Farrell (2007) recommends the journal be written on the same day of the event to avoid forgotten details. The writer then sequences events before, during, and after the class. The writer also elaborates on the events in detail. Finally, the writer analyzes the significance of events. The process occurs as so: sequences → events → elaboration → analysis. In addition to this approach, Murphy (2014) considers three cognitive dimensions: *reflection-in-action,* the pedagogically informed decisions made during a lesson*, reflection-on-action,* the reporting and elucidation of classroom episodes mediated by pedagogical knowledge and personal insight*,* and *reflection-for-action*, a subsequent pedagogical goal or plan. With these principals in mind, my journal initially followed Farrell's (2007) recommended procedure. Subsequent adjustments to the journal reflected Murphy's (2014) cognitive dimensions. Entries were made once a week for the duration of four weeks on the online interface Blogger. Blogger was initially chosen as a possible platform which allows feedback from other teachers in the department, but due to project constraints the interface was used only as a means of personal record keeping.

Socio-Cultural Theory, Mediation, and Feedback

The project was guided by Vygotskian social-cultural theory (SCT), which posits that learning is a socially mediated process. Lantolf (2011) defines mediation as the "creation and use of artificial means of acting – physically, socially, and mentally" (p. 25). Here, the artificial means of acting refers to the use of created *tools* –physical objects which enhance performance – as well as the use of *symbolic tools* –such as language (Lantolf, 2011). Another component of SCT is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which represents the distance between what a learner can do with social assistance and what a learner can do alone (Lantolf, 2011). The goal is for the learner to

appropriate tools with decreasing assistance over time, a process coined ontogenesis. While ontogenesis develops over a long period of time, brief and intermittent internalization may occur, coined microgenesis (Atkinson, 2011).

In second language acquisition, SCT-guided researchers often look to how feedback strategies facilitate microgenesis. Feedback types can first be divided into two types: *implicit*, a low degree of assistance, and *explicit*, a high degree of assistance. The goal for learners is to complete tasks with progressively less need for explicit feedback; to move toward autonomous appropriation in the ZPD. Some implicit feedback types are the Three Cs: *clarification request*, *confirmation check*, and *comprehension check*. The Three Cs work to indicate misunderstanding, but do not highlight problematic areas nor do they provide preferred forms (Gass, 2005). A less implicit type of feedback is a reformulated recast, which offers an utterance back to a speaker in an adjusted form – less implicit than the Three Cs because it is often re-casted into a more comprehendible and/or preferred form. As for explicit types, metalinguistic feedback (explaining or translation) and projecting (finishing another's utterance) are common strategies (Gass, 2005). These are explicit feedback-types because they not only highlight problematic items but also provide solutions without giving the learner opportunity to participate in task resolution.

With these principles of learning theory in mind, my journal observations concerned: (1) how learners engaged in peer-to-peer mediation through assistive feedback in group discussion, (2) how reflective journal keeping afforded my classroom approaches, and (3) how and why I adapted the journal keeping process along the way. The project addressed a Level III eight-student discussion class. Level III is derived from a TOEIC band of 480 to 679. Although placed as Level III, as a whole the learners struggled to work well together. In terms of peer-to-peer assistance, learners rarely used feedback strategy to mediate breakdowns in communication, but when mediation was attempted they often relied on explicit assistance, such as metalinguistic feedback by translation. For these reasons, the target class was most in need of informed adjustment to the learning environment.

DISCUSSION

Concerning adaptions to journal keeping processes, initially, I began the journal with four steps: *sequence* → *events* → *elaboration* → *analysis*. After one journal entry, I felt the need for an additional step through which I could plan classroom adjustments, per Farrell (2007). From the second journal entry, I ended the journal with a "goals" step, where I planned classroom strategies for better facilitating what I observed and analyzed. Following this, I felt the need to report the results of my adjustment, which was done in the elaboration and analysis section of subsequent journal entries. The addition of a "goals" step along with reporting results in observation and analysis seemed to fulfill the need for informed action in the classroom. This evolution of the journal keeping process gravitated toward Murphy's (2014) three cognitive dimensions of reflective teaching. The "goal" addition fulfilled *reflection-for-action*, the act of adjusting classroom strategy involved *reflection-in-action*, and reporting results in subsequent journal entries fulfilled *reflection-on-action*. It seems the adaption occurred because, initially, my journal did not include *reflection-for-action*. This adjustment seemed to better facilitate informed investigation and adaption of my classroom environment.

In the elaboration and analysis steps of the journal, I detailed how learners provided assistive feedback in discussion. I described the type of feedback used in both the listener and speaker roles. Table 1 details the standard feedback-type equivalent for the course's target language items, known as Functions and Communication Skills in the course. Items are listed from most implicit (top) to most explicit (bottom):

Table 1. Observed Common Feedback-Types in English Discussion Class

Course Target Items	*Feedback Type*
Function-Based Follow-Up Questions	Clarification Request "How about from parents' perspective?" "Are the any disadvantages?"
Checking Understanding	Clarification Request "I don't understand." Comprehension Check "Do you follow me?"
Paraphrasing	Reformulated Recast "So, do you mean speaking is important?"
How do you say [L1 item] in English?	Metalinguistic: L1-L2 Translation Request
You can say [L2 equivalent].	Metalinguistic: L1-L2 Translation
Other types of feedback not named in the course	Projecting Speaker: "So, there are many..." Listener: "...problems."

The degree to which implicit or explicit feedback types best facilitate microgenesis depends on the developmental level of the learners (Atkinson, 2011). In order to gauge which type of feedback best suites a learner, feedback can be graduated. That is, if an implicit feedback type does not afford preferable adjustment, a more explicit feedback-type can be used as increased assistance (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994).

Learners observed in the target class most often used L1-to-L2 translation requests for more explicit assistance. However, when requests could not be fulfilled (*I don't know how to say that in English*), learners sometimes reformulated utterances instead. In this way, denying requests for translation indicated continued misunderstanding, and this functioned as an implicit clarification request. It has the same effect as "I don't understand" or "Can you repeat that?" Interestingly, instead of moving to more explicit feedback types, as an instructor might do, learners sometimes moved to more implicit feedback types. Learners seemed to realize that, instead of using L1 symbolic tools, they were capable of using their L2 symbolic tools to mediate understanding. For instance, I observed in the target class a learner requesting translation of *komaru* (困る: troubled, bothered). When peers indicated that they could not translate ("Sorry, I don't know.") they offered clarification requests ("Can you give me an example?") as well as reformulated recasts ("Do you mean difficult?"). Following these implicit feedback moves, learners came to a sufficient L2 understanding of the L1 item. In this way, I observed that learners could use function-based follow-up questions (clarification requests) to mediate understanding without the need of explicit assistance, thus allowing progression toward autonomous task resolution in the L2. Guided by established journal-keeping methodology I actively identified the above features and subsequently pursued alternative approaches to better facilitate peer-to-peer mediation in the target class.

The first major adaption was connecting functions to follow-up questions. This was displayed visually on the board with magnetic cards bearing only the names of the functions and communication skills (see Figure 1). I used the visual to represent symbolic mediational tools at the learner's disposal, in this case clarification requests in the form of function-based follow-up questions. In Figure 1, "Different Viewpoints" and "Balancing Opinions" are linked as "Follow-

Up Questions." This encouraged frequent clarification requests. Similarly, to encourage reformulated recasts, I linked "Checking Understanding" with "Paraphrasing." This also seemed to raise the learners' awareness of how comprehension checks and reformulated recasts can mediate the development of mutual understanding. Due to the of the way the target items were presented, learners understood that they could be used to provide various types of assistance in episodes of misunderstanding as well as building on the general understanding of ideas. I also linked requests for translation to paraphrasing, offering learners a less explicit alternative to direct translation. In this way, the magnetic cards on the board acted as co-constructed social artefacts to be appropriated as mediational tools which regulate assistance in the ZPD.

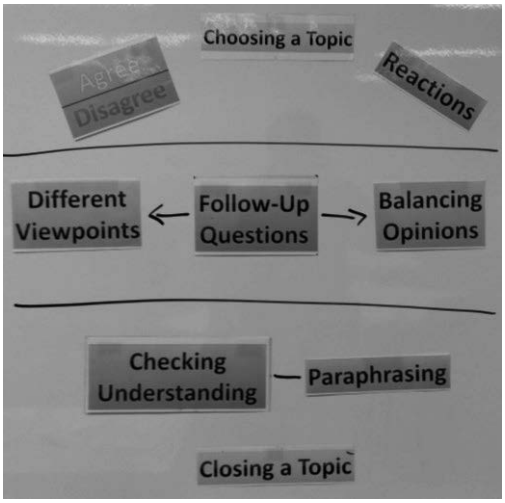

Figure 1. Magnetic cards on whiteboard.

The cards in Figure 1 represent the symbolic tools used to mediate understanding in peer-to-peer group discussion.

CONCLUSION

In order to make informed and effective pedagogical decisions, a reflective teaching journal seems to function best when all three cognitive dimensions are incorporated, thus allowing grounded adjustments to classroom methodology. In effect, the reflective journal afforded my active identification of assistive feedback-types and informed my classroom approaches to enhancing peer-to-peer feedback and mediation. My primary adjustment was visually presenting the target items as tools which mediate understanding, and linking them in ways which best facilitate implicit feedback strategies. Learners were observed to have successfully achieved understanding with less explicit assistance, thus promoting microgenesis. The target items became not the ends of learning in themselves but the items with which learning is socially mediated.

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